

ALTERNATIVE SEXUALITIES IN VISUAL NARRATIVES: A READING OF LIGY J. PULLAPPALLY'S FILM *THE JOURNEY*

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ABSTRACT

*The main objective of queer narratives is, to address the issues of gender and sexuality and the taboos related to the same. Queer narratives address the position of the queer in the social and cultural fabrics. The realist writers and film makers tend to reflect human experiences truthfully, and make people aware of the social problems of the particular society. They expose the hetero patriarchal social structure, which became the norm, since the Victorian period that hurled down the sexual minorities into the abyss of misery. In Indian society, women are generally considered as déclassé and have become the victims of patriarchal norms. The sole purpose of this paper is to depict the stark aspects that silence the women and homosexuals, suppress their voices and obliterate their presence in the social and cultural fabric of India. This paper analyses the work of Ligy J. Pullappally, a 21st Century film maker. Pullappally's film *The Journey* is set against South Indian background. The narrative in different forms presents the concept of power and gender inequality. In the *Journey*, the director discusses the issue of oppression on the basis of gender and sexuality. She exposes the operation of queer psyche. The movie makes dramatic representation of lesbian issue.*

KEYWORDS: *Queer, Gender, Social, Lesbian & Sexuality*

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INTRODUCTION

Lesbianism gained political space in Indian discourses by the collective efforts of LGBT liberation organizations and various NGOs, scattered all over India. The existence of lesbian identities and culture has been made invisible to public domain by the hetero patriarchal agencies. These sexual minorities are been marginalized, and it is a case of human rights violation. The normative institution of heterosexual family assumes lesbianism as a threat. They consider lesbianism as an act of intervention into the established social structure. The heterosexual family has held an intransigent position in the Indian culture since recorded times. History has deliberately erased the evidences about the existence of other sexualities and gender identities in order to propagate hetero normative ideologies. The institution of heterosexual family is deeply rooted into the culture and reigns undisputed; and a family derived from this union is considered sacrosanct. This was established further through multitudes of discourses.

Discourse here can be considered as a form of power. Through various discourses – whether it be writings, movies or art, men have always overpowered women and so the heterosexuals over alternate sexualities. Complex forms of marginalization can be found within Indian sub-continent. The practice of categorizing people on the basis of sexuality is merely a century old western concept. To be able to live as whom one wants or to have meaningful relationships is unthinkable in Indian society. The desire to have gay/lesbian relationships was at odds

with South Asian culture, where being homosexual was something you did, not something you were. Yet homosexuality is, and has always been, a part of Indian culture before the British Raj, much as it is all over other countries of South Asia — Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka. The concept of drawing a veil over sensitive topics simply kept it under wraps.

In Indian society, the only possible courtship one can have is the socially accepted one i.e. the heterosexual union. Any other form of sexual encounters is prohibited. The sexual minorities are terrified of violence and abusive language used by the hetero normative society against them. They live in a state of constant fear. Ligy J. Pullappally focuses on seating issues regarding gender and sexuality in her Malayalam movie *The Journey* (Sancharam). But while she trains her eye on questions of gender she also seems to be fighting for feminine self. The feminine protagonists are the victims of a rigid system. The director was successful in her attempt to discuss about forbidden theme through her visual narrative. The film has been screened in international film festivals and has gained much critical commendation.

The movie portrays the love story between two girls in their youth. The opening scene is of a beautiful landscape with a soothing background score and the audience begins to discern a woman in white dress standing at top of rock near a waterfall. The lights gradually grow brighter, and we are able to see Kiran's face. The narrative shifts to the protagonists' childhood and the audiences get to know the characters Kiran, Delilah and Rajan. Gradually the story develops and audiences are taken to the protagonists' teenage days.

Rajan develops attraction towards Delilah. Kiran helps Rajan compose passionate, poetic love letters to Delilah, but those letters were in fact expressions of her own love for Delilah. Delilah, however, suspects the genuineness of the letters. She finds disparity in previous letters and the new ones. She soon unearths the truth. Kiran's homosexuality is revealed to Delilah when Kiran unintentionally recite the exact content written in Rajan's love letter to Delilah. The love letters were in fact written by Kiran herself. Kiran is terrified that this will ruin their friendship, but she is relieved when Delilah confesses similar feelings. Delilah reciprocates her love as soon as she finds the truth. Their relationship lasted only for a brief period until Rajan's intervention. He informs Thresiamma about Delilah and Kiran's affair. Thresiamma forcefully put an end to the relationship. She fixes Delilah's marriage to a groom who recently approached with a marriage proposal for Delilah. She reluctantly agrees to marry to save the family's reputation. However, Delilah is confused whether she has taken the right decision or not. It is reflected upon her action at the church during her wedding ceremony, where she runs towards the door and shouts her lover's name. We are taken back to the very first scene of the movie where Kiran is standing at top of a rock near a waterfall. The calm and composed Kiran contemplate her next step. In the final scene Kiran liberates herself by cutting her long hair and walks away from the waterfall.

Homosexuals invariably move towards death, isolation, or a sham heterosexual marriage of the kind Delilah is heading towards. *The Journey* lifts the veil of secrecy that shrouds the marginalized cultures, sexualities and lifestyles. The movie attempts to pose questions, knowing that final answers are hardly possible. The movie boldly presents the lesbian issue in a rural setting. Since it is a taboo topic there wasn't much market for its promotional activities. Curiously enough, a movie as 'daring' as this actually did not proved to be an enormous commercial success in Kerala. However, *The Journey* has been critically acclaimed by the Jury of the Kerala State Film Awards. It stands apart from main stream movies. It has tried to be truthful in the narration by standing apart from stereotypical representations of the queer in Indian cinema. Being able to see them on screen itself gives queer community the possibility to come into terms with their identities.

The hetero patriarchal norms of the society crush the sexual minorities. If the couple had the chance to live as they want, to live with their loved ones regardless of their gender or sexuality, Delilah's forced marriage would not happen in

the first place. The movie also discusses the issue of inter-caste relationship between the protagonists Delilah and Kiran and also of heterosexual couples. The latter's relationship was also forbidden in the caste conscious society. The biased norms of the society takes away individual are instinctual freedom. An imposed harmony always results in resistance. Kiran fights for her love until Delilah refuses her for the sake of family honour.

Today's Indian society with its pseudo norms and values prohibits any form of sexual union other than the heterosexual. People are coerced to live according to these values and norms. An attempt of forced marriage happens when Kiran and Delilah's relationship is found by Delilah's mother, Thresiamma. Delilah is compelled by her mother into marrying a man. Thresiamma has her own caste honour and cannot uphold this due to her daughter's well known immoral act. She brainwashes her daughter into marrying her suitor. Delilah agrees for a heterosexual marriage. The characters Thresiamma and Kiran's mother Priya, portrays the stereotypical mother figures who becomes the agents of hetero patriarchal ideologies. For instance, Kiran's mother calls her own daughter "unnatural".

The Journey explores the issue of same-sex love in a traditional South Indian community. The protagonists Kiran and Delilah are childhood friends who develop feelings for each other in their youth. They were not bothered about anybody else's interference until they were caught. The contrasting approaches of the protagonists and their parents towards the lesbian issue are notable. Pullappally reveals to the audiences the universal nature of the issue. The film's international acclaim adds to it. Since the advent of internet censoring, taboo issues and topics have become meaningless. The modern society is aware of such sensitive issues. And, moreover attempts are been made to voice the unheard. *The Journey* points out that in a hetero patriarchal society it is impossible for a lesbian to gain social space. Her identity is lost in the realm of social codes. Pullappally discusses other themes such as the custom of arranged marriages in Indian society. Delilah's suitor and his family visiting Thresiamma's house with a marriage proposal for Delilah indicates the conservative notions of Indian society towards marriage. The director chooses the Indian setting and gives space to the audiences to think about the problems faced by lesbians in a non-accepting society. Pullappally was successful in portraying the inner struggle of the protagonists with the aid of a well-crafted plot and excellent cinematic structuring.

The Journey is a movie which discusses a multitude of issues. For instance, the position of women in a patriarchal society or the hetero normative norms dominates over the same-sex identities. The emotional turmoil the lesbians go through in a non-accepting society is unfathomable. The conventional social practices make the homosexual life impossible. The movie makes sure that the voice of the marginalized is heard. Pullappally's intention is clear in bringing light to such issues that people otherwise choose to ignore. She calls for a major alteration in society's value system. The director realistically presents conflicting issues through her narrative. Lesbians and gays are affected by the anarchy loosed upon them by the hetero normative society. The concept of one community thriving at the expense of another is purely unethical. Queer community should be given a space in Indian society. Pullappally uses cinematic medium to speak about the problems faced by lesbians against the patriarchal populace.

The homo sexual identities are not acknowledged in the traditional Indian society. These identities live in fear in a homophobic society. They live in closeted spaces and coming out in such a society has dangerous consequences. They are tortured and ridiculed in public spaces. Queer narratives try to portray the lives of such neglected identities. Sexuality cannot be secluded. The feelings one person has for the other is instinctual. There is nothing unnatural about it. A social reformation is inevitable. Indian society is craving for sexual liberation for ages. The modern discourses appeal for gender equality. *The Journey* focuses on lesbian issues within the Indian scenario. The movie discusses the theme of gender and

sexuality.

Realization of the self and reliance on social norms are two distinctive facets of human experience. Human consciousness sustains its own autonomy of perceptions and reaction and subsequently the outset cannot be calculated in terms of pre-organized and pre-calculated operation of human behavior. New possibilities of human experiences opened up by the radical changes in life conditions. The prejudiced notions that we develop in our thoughts can be the result of social codifications. By realizing the difference one can make radical changes in the society.

Sexual desires are controlled by the canons of morality, in spite of being related with instinctive behavior. It is often linked with engenderment and therefore, the only possible mode of the acceptance is heterosexuality i.e. man and woman relationship. Heterosexuality has been treated as the 'norm' and homosexuality has been shunned as 'deviant', perversion and even criminal ever since the British Raj in India and in other common wealth countries. Politically, the lesbians and gays are not given space in established structure. Homosexuals in India suffer identity crisis along with external sense of guilt.

Judith Butler (1990) in her famous studies *Gender Trouble* has interrogated on the question of identity. She has focused on the modes of representation of gay/lesbians and the identities based on gender and sexual differences. Butler suggests that the issue is not of avowing or disavowing the categories, but specifying the true determinant of the meaning of sexuality itself. Whether it means anatomy or the actual act of sex or the gender, she asserts that gay/lesbian theory seeks to elucidate the specificity of queer experiences and sexuality. Homosexuality is present within the construction of heterosexuality itself. Homosexuality is a state of mind where individual asserts to protest against the extant of sex-binary in the social order. In heterosexual relations there is an obvious tendency of domination, torture and oppression towards the 'other'. Compulsory heterosexuality is a result of power politics that only ensures women's continued subordination because it privileges hetero patriarchal needs and ideologies. The false notion regarding homosexuality is that it is against the natural instinctive behavior. It is deemed unethical. Depiction of homosexuality as a guilt and heterosexuality as ideal results in terrible anguish and sufferings in queer identities.

Sexuality studies are multidisciplinary in nature. It touches upon the areas of sociology, cultural studies, history, gender studies, literary studies, anthropology and ethnic studies programs. The main advantage is that there is immense possibility for sexuality studies to flourish in the academic field. Moreover, sexuality can be studied in various perspectives without constraining it to a single disciplinary approach. Queer Studies is been offered as a subject in various academic programs. (Halberstam, 2005)

Queer Cinema and queer literature comes within the genre of queer studies. The paper reflects upon queer issues in visual narratives. The homosexual life style is different from heterosexual life style. The conservative community feels threatened by the life style of the homosexuals. The need to oppress the same-sex identities might have arrived out of this. The queer follows contrasting life style rather than the established social life style. Foucault considers homosexuality as a way of life. The practice of tagging individuals to their sexual preferences is regressive in our modern society. (Halberstam, 2005).

Foucault was against the concept of categorization of individuals on the basis of gender and sexuality. Foucault's conception of aesthetics of existence may trace back to his understanding of the transgressive potential of becoming homosexual. Foucault refused the scientific subjection of homosexuals. An art of life rather than science is needed for the

conscious choice to be lesbian/gay. The existence of LGBT identities depends on the constant efforts to voice these unheard identities. At present, LGBT issues are been discussed in the academic and cultural spaces. The efforts should be made to relate such identities with new forms beyond the established structures.(Simons, 2004)

Indian movies have always dealt with complex themes, but still are reluctant to talk about taboo topics like homosexuality. Even women centered themes are drawn within the constraints of male centered ideologies. There have been only a few attempts to represent these minorities through art and cinema. There is an urgent need for the representation of the queer in film and media. Assertion of one's own voice is the catch phrase of today's age. Silence is not gold anymore. People are fighting for their rights. The protests have turned into celebrations for some of the queer communities in various parts of the world. Queer representation has earned its importance in world cinema. Many international film festivals are screening queer themed films. In spite of all this, only a few Indian film makers have attempted telling the stories which represents the queer identities.

The Journey is a well-crafted movie with a beautiful cinematography. The actors have performed well. It is just a simple love story; everything is clichéd or common place in it just that it happens to be a love story between two women. Even though, it is between two women, anybody who was oppressed based on societal norms, anybody who has ever rebelled can relate to this movie. The reactions of the two main characters are also very clichéd, one who wants to keep fighting till death, one who is succumbing to it. It is not a portrayal of a man and woman, it is a portrayal of two individuals hammered by slightly different moral codes and hammered to a different degree. The two individuals had a different degree of understanding of what was happening to each other. The antagonists also have a different level of understanding of the situation, but one's understanding should not be used to control other's actions. That is where the antagonists have erred. It is a simple portrayal. But, the undertone is more evident as it portrays a static society, repulsion towards change.

Delilah's family is anxious for her hasty marriage to avoid a clash between the societal norms and the unaccepted way of life that Delilah has already entered into. Her family is afraid of consequences for her actions. Indian society do not approve of unnatural relationships. The only solution left with Delilah's family was to marry her off to a man. If it were the case of two gay men it would be a different scenario. Men have much freedom in Indian society compared to women. The lesbian women are thrown into forced marriages. The situation is different for a homosexual man. There is less chance for a forced marriage. He has opportunity to leave the family. But, woman's position is rather pathetic in Indian society. Without any financial security and support she cannot thrive on her own. Pullappally in a way discusses the fact that lesbians cannot make their relationship acceptable in a homophobic society. They are terrified of the pain and agony because they are not able to express themselves or live a life of their choice.

Pullappally probes into the layers of human consciousness through her characters. The movie also drags the audience into the Self versus Society debate. It is neither about individuality or modern ideals nor philosophizing what right and wrong. It is about acceptance required from each individual who is set on repressing and want to have a say on someone else's life based on their own moral code. Each of the characters may be victim, since there is no absolute for everyone at all times. But, there can be an absolute for each one at a single point of time which forces us to make a choice to be or not be an agent of preconceived societal norms.

To represent the idea of 'lesbian culture' in visual media is a difficult task. There is a quick succession of shifting in external and internal zones, between logical and illogical behavior, between social taboo and psychological

compulsions. The making of the movie was in fact a challenging experience for the director. She was able to present the lesbian theme objectively. The on screen chemistry of the actors who played the protagonists was spectacular. The cinematography of the movie is commendable. Pullappally's movie is an exploration of relationships that is necessarily suspected by social givens. Gays and lesbians do exist in our society. It is time to recognize and acknowledge their presence.

Lesbians and gays have their concept of sexual relationship but they can't escape the need of sexual differences determined by nature. *The Journey* moves between sexual and socio-cultural dilemma of the life of homosexuals. The director's effort to create a space for the lesbian community in the cinematic spectrum is appreciable. The script is the basic element of the film but the dramatic masterpiece remains incomplete without performance. She tries to make a connection between the spectator, performers and the dramatic sequences of the movie. The plot of the movie is rather simple. The director has tried to present a serious issue truthfully on to screen. She was able to capture the varying sensibilities of the characters in the movie. The unbiased presentation of heterosexual and homosexual complexities within the plot was a taxing effort.

CONCLUSIONS

Pullappally was successful in bringing out a universal appeal through her narration. Time and conditions alters, but the realization of life beyond consciousness is comprehensive, hence it is external and timeless. The narrator maintains an exceptional dexterity in unfolding the layers of human consciousness on the issues that are buried in perpetual silence. Pullappally's movie urges for the social acceptance of lesbian community. She addresses the issue of woman as a lesbian as well as the problems faced by women as a result of gender inequality. The hetero patriarchal majority does not allow the sexual minorities to lead a life of their own choice. They see lesbians as a threat to their conservative style of living. In reality, both heterosexual and homosexual identities can share equal space in any society with mutual respect. Amendments should be made in the respective systems for a positive outcome.

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